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Philippine Rebels Targeting Rights Groups, Churches

*Infiltration Described as Greater
Than Is Publicly Acknowledged*

By William Branigin
Washington Post Foreign Service

MANILA—A campaign by American missionaries in the Philippines to oppose U.S. military aid for the government of President Corazon Aquino and portray communist insurgents more sympathetically has stirred controversy among church leaders here.

The controversy over an open "letter of concern," which was signed by 50 American missionaries and sent to more than 1,000 Christian churches in the United States recently, reflects a deeper struggle for the loyalties of a highly influential segment of society: the religious leadership of the only Christian country in Asia. Those loyalties are coming under increasing scrutiny as the Aquino government seeks to negotiate an end to a 17-year-old insurgency being waged by the Communist Party of the Philippines and its guerrilla arm, the New People's Army (NPA).

According to Filipino and foreign sources, the Communist Party has infiltrated what it calls the "church sector" in the Philippines and forged links abroad with church groups, human rights organizations, labor unions and associations of expatriate Filipinos to a much greater extent than is publicly acknowledged here. The sources include Filipino political and military analysts, church leaders, western diplomats and researchers and communist officials and publications.

Some of the foreign groups are based in the United States and raise money that is ultimately channeled to communist front organizations here, including church-affiliated human rights groups, or to the party itself, sources say. According to a report by Brig. Gen. Isidro Agunod to the Defense Ministry's Office for Plans and Programs, at least 90 human rights organizations in the Philippines serve as communist fronts.

The Communist Party tends to belittle reports of its infiltration activities and its use of front organizations as "red scare tactics" employed by its enemies. But communist publications, including captured internal documents, make clear that major party efforts are devoted to front-building and infiltration work, especially in church groups.

A Communist Party document entitled "General Orientation of Our Work Within the Church Sector," for example, urges "comrades, activists and revolutionary mass organizations in the churches sector" to reach "a higher and deeper level of involvement and participation." The undated paper, which was apparently written about 1982, was captured in a raid on a communist

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hideout and made available by a military commander in a Philippine province.

"Under the guidance of the party," members of the church sector "have put up legal organizations, programs and offices and have transformed existing [ones] to serve the revolutionary cause," the paper says. It describes ways to use church leaders to influence Filipino moderates and develop international support.

An earlier paper, entitled "Nature of the Church Sector, Orientation of our Political Work and Tasks of Comrades Within the Sector," characterizes churches in general as "reactionary institutions" and describes the Roman Catholic Church in particular as "basically feudal" and "authoritarian." Nevertheless, it says, a "growing" number of church members support the revolution, and the sector should not be ignored.

The paper calls for the formation of "collectives" in church groups, congregations, seminaries and projects as part of an "underground network within the sector" linked up "through appropriate party units." Comrades who "penetrate the offices" of church institutions should set up mass organizations, especially ecumenical ones, in which "maximum independence and initiative can be exercised by Party and national democratic elements," it says.

The term "national democratic," in Philippine communist terminology, usually refers to the National Democratic Front (NDF), an underground organization established in 1973. Communist propaganda calls the front a broad-based coalition that includes the Communist Party and the NPA—founded in 1968 and 1969 respectively—as well as non-communist labor, student and church groups. In reality, however, the front is a creation of the party intended to complement the NPA's armed struggle.

According to knowledgeable church sources, at least two of the Philippines' 105 Roman Catholic bishops are affiliated with the National Democratic Front.

In their "letter of concern" sent to American churches in August, the U.S. missionaries expressed support for the aims of the National Democratic Front and understanding for the armed struggle. The 25-page letter—published in booklet form and "endorsed" by 44 other foreign missionaries and 69 Filipino church leaders, including 15 bishops—also lobbied against U.S. military aid to the Philippines and condemned the presence of large American naval and air bases in the country.

The letter described the front as "a broad political coalition aimed at transforming the country's political and economic system toward nationalism and democracy." The NPA, it said, "appears to be a well-led and disciplined force" that has provided simple community health services, curbed criminality and abuses by local officials and sought to "protect rural folk from intimidation" by the military and "numerous fanatic sects."

The letter strongly disputed the assessment of a 1985 Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff report that "the NPA's objective is to destroy Philippine democracy and to install a system where individual rights and dissent would be drastically curtailed if not abolished." The NPA, the letter said, "is a broadly based popular movement of resistance against internal domination and repression by an elite class of Filipinos and external domination through unequal trade relations, dependent development and foreign military bases." The guerrillas fighters "are not necessarily advocates of violence, but are willing to participate in a struggle which includes armed resistance" to transform society and achieve "genuine sharing of power among all classes," it added.

The letter warned that the aim of U.S. policy is "to crush the Philippine nationalist movement." This policy will only prolong the "revolutionary turmoil" in the country, it said, and may lead to U.S. military intervention so destructive that it would amount to "genocide."

In response, 17 foreign and Filipino Jesuits issued their own statement Sept. 8, criticizing the "letter of concern" as "biased" in favor of the communist rebels. Cutting off U.S. military aid, they argued, would not only weaken the Aquino government's position in negotiating with the rebels, but hurt its ability to deal with supporters of former president Ferdinand Marcos, Moslem separatists, political warlords, fanatic religious sects and "lost commands" of renegade soldiers and armed bandits.

The Jesuits' six-page statement charged that the letter of concern played down the rebels' "Marxist-Leninist-Maoist" philosophy, with its inherent atheism, and glossed over communist abuses. The letter's only critical comment about the rebels was that "the NPA has been responsible for some abuses," the Jesuits noted. This "pathetic understatement," they said, "clearly admits but does not at all condemn" widespread NPA liquidations and purges that have claimed thousands of lives over the years.

The Jesuits also questioned the letter's assertion that the revolutionary movement "receives neither aid nor guidance from communist movements in the Soviet Union, China or other countries." They noted, "There are well-founded reports that big money is coming to the [Communist Party] from outside the country, from European funding agencies as well as from sympathetic groups in the United States and Australia."

While the Jesuits' statement did not identify the groups, the "letter of concern" urged readers to contact five U.S.-based organizations for "timely and reliable resource materials": the Church Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines, Friends of the Filipino People, the Alliance for Philippine Concerns, the Philippine Resource Center and the Philippine Support Committee.

According to U.S. officials in Washington, knowledgeable sources in the Philippines and literature published by the groups, all

THE WASHINGTON POST

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five of them either have organizational links to the National Democratic Front or espouse specific National Democratic Front positions.

The Washington-based Church Coalition is headed by Dante Simbulan, a graduate of the Philippine Military Academy and a popular former teacher in his native land. According to a congressional expert on the Philippine insurgency, the U.S. government has identified Simbulan as having "definite links" to the Communist Party of the Philippines.

The group's bimonthly publication, *Philippine Witness*, calls for "tax-deductible donations" through the United Methodist Church or the National Council of Churches. It describes the Church Coalition as a nonprofit ecumenical group that is the "U.S. partner of the Ecumenical Partnership for International Concerns in the Philippines." This group and an organization it helped establish, Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, a self-described "human rights organization" affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, have been reliably identified here as effective communist fronts. Another church-associated group that has been heavily infiltrated by communists, according to U.S. congressional experts and sources here, is Basic Christian Communities, a nationwide organization active among peasants in remote rural areas.

A spokesman for the Church Coalition, the Rev. Doug Cunningham, a United Methodist minister, said in Washington that no members of the Ecumenical Partnership were National Democratic Front members per se, although some were active in Bayan, a leftist Philippine coalition set up in Manila in 1985.

According to Filipino political sources and western diplomats, Bayan was founded essentially by Communist Party activists using an elderly former senator, Lorenzo Tanada, as a figurehead. The coalition, which claims about 500 affiliated groups totaling more than 1 million adherents, represents the party's most successful united front-building effort to date, the sources said. An Australian scholar, John Whitehall, has called Bayan "a legal front for the illegal National Democratic Front."

According to U.S. congressional and administration sources, elements in the National Council of Churches and the United Church of Christ have had dealings with the

front and have been involved in channeling donations to leftist Philippine groups that may be guerrilla fronts.

American officials said that while the U.S.-based groups have been active in supporting the rebel cause, the bulk of foreign funding for the Philippine communists comes from Western Europe, mainly through church groups and labor unions there.

In a recent 31-page report on "Communism in the Philippines," Australian scholar Whitehall said Task Force Detainees and a militant labor federation, the Kilusang Mayo Uno (May First Movement) were among the leading communist fronts that receive large contributions from foreign sources. Another major front, he wrote, is the League of Filipino Students, which he called a "recruiting pool" for the Communist Party.

Task Force Detainees refuses to reveal the sources and amounts of its foreign contributions. Its chairwoman, Sister Mariani Dimaranan, denies it is procommunist and attributes such charges to a "massive CIA covert operation."

Since its establishment in 1974 under the auspices of the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines, Task Force Detainees has accused government security forces of murdering more than 2,000 Filipinos, abducting more than 600 and illegally arresting, torturing, shooting or otherwise abusing the human rights of thousands of others. But the organization has never investigated an NPA execution or any other abuse committed by the rebels. A British nun who serves as a spokeswoman for Task Force Detainees, Mary Radcliffe, has said there was no need to monitor communist abuses "because the newspapers report such things." In any case, she has suggested, killings by the NPA are "provoked" by the military and amount to justifiable acts of war.

Task Force chairwoman Dimaranan, a member of the executive committee of Bayan, now also sits as a member of the Presidential Commission on Human Rights, which is investigating military abuses under the Marcos regime. The commission has rejected military requests for an expanded probe also covering NPA abuses, argues that the rebels operate outside the law and cannot be held the same standards of conduct government forces.